

# **THE CONQUEST OF MEXICO**

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## Conquest

A strategist conducts the bloody blast  
Before this, gave the signal to succeed  
His soldiers can be laid with little heed  
Then subjugates the alien mainland fast

Who - whispering a word - a spell has cast  
Can venture for the highest might, proceed  
And after having worked his cunning deed  
Will him await the heavenly court at last

Endeavour is a form of sly desire  
For ware and wealth, for loot, for god and gold  
O death, where is thy sting and where thy crypt?

Now there he stands, with all the life to tire  
The lover brought his honey to a hold  
Who thus gets recompense, or is she ripped?

**Fout! Bladwijzer niet gedefinieerd.**

## Unsubstantial

A legion slaughtered Montezuma's lord  
It gave the scoffed at priests the old heave-go  
It made no headway as befits a foe  
Disturbed the blood that Huichilobos poured

A hole into his soaking vessels bored  
His limbs are lost, he faced the dried up flow  
The pockmarked carcass got the final blow  
In every bone resounds the final chord

Ah Huichilobos, I believe you bleed  
It is your head, screwed off. The gold is changed  
For lead, now modify your pose and sense

Your time is gone, your might has run to seed  
This area your sizes rearranged  
Bye kill-joy, killed by overconfidence

**Fout! Bladwijzer niet gedefinieerd.**

### The holy host

Hernando grills the gangs on airy thought  
Dispatches fragments of the mouldered brave  
Dispersed the enemy. No inch he gave  
The heavy odds. Now flee who is not caught

The push has cleft and to its finish brought  
A service. Clouds discharged, no one is safe  
From Tlaloc, this is Huichilobos' slave  
Two bitter brothers, with deception fraught

The images can easily be slain  
But though the army well may clear the air  
It is as if the gods provoke it still

No further, seasoned cashier of the gain  
The war will even equalize your flair  
Partition man, the bottom and your will

**Fout! Bladwijzer niet gedefinieerd.**

### Carlos V of Spain

The monarch had his servants  
The leaders and the crowd  
He ruled at his discretion  
Convened and disavowed

He might have them beheaded  
Or dress them with brocade  
In foreign parts deport them  
Or bear them in his state

Manipulated many  
In every place an eye  
And where his trip not led him  
His liegeman sure drew nigh

Demanded many treasures  
And left no piece alone  
With it as god he governed  
Within a sheltered zone

The Indian unbeliever  
Embraced the cross at length  
Pope Leo X was flattered  
In that lay Carlos' strength

**Fout! Bladwijzer niet gedefinieerd.**

Thus did he send a henchman  
By name Cortés Hernan  
Whole Mexico he sullied  
Its downfall was his plan

Hernando has been driven  
Or drove, if this seemed wise  
In this his private dungeon  
He slept with open eyes

He thundered and he ranted  
Depending on his plight  
And started raving, whining  
Or whistled, sang so bright

He flung about his mandates  
The sword he drew and see  
Whoever dared to thwart him  
Were forced onto their knee

Rewarded or beheaded  
With menace did he tame  
The flower of the Indians  
Which from all classes came

**Fout! Bladwijzer niet gedefinieerd.**

Dethroned god Huichilobos  
Gave crosses a firm hold  
Struck warrior Montezuma  
Down from a throne of gold

Whose riches and existence  
The grace of god him gave  
The earthly life has fled  
As on a tidal wave

My sentences are written  
For the land of Mexico  
That bitterly has suffered  
Through cruel, tyrannic foe

Dead people, I deplore you  
Who not accepted god  
By superstition aided  
You vanished into naught

No purpose served this dying  
But king and god and gold  
The Aztec fell from power  
A nation lost its hold

**Fout! Bladwijzer niet gedefinieerd.**



To my wife and child

The travel urge you duly have restrained  
Of him who rather swords than ploughshares bore  
Who asked too much of you, of others more  
The ones I loved I left, from peace abstained

Then joined the clans from sight and hearing drained  
Your stay, who flung his own stays to the floor  
The adversary's mouth was making for  
And never was my rest with you regained

I had to seize an omnipotent might  
Hernan Cortés, is he not one of them?  
He is like Huichilobos in his flaws

I do not mind, devoured overnight  
I shall pretend that I his forage am  
But poison him when pressed between his jaws

**Fout! Bladwijzer niet gedefinieerd.**

### Realm of Aztecs in labour

Cortés impersonates the fallow fan  
Columbus. Every ground is put aside  
These people have enough, are sorely tried  
Struck down by smallpox and the papal clan

The strategist who clasps Tenochtitlán  
Thanks God who girt him on the metal pride  
And this is why the word decayed and died  
The House is due, makes cracks in every man

With every ne'er-do-well who tricks the king  
The foreign army racks nobility  
Hernando's blood runs cold, too cramped the room

For those who were not left an opening  
More residents are - too straightforwardly  
Delivered and yet trapped in alien womb

**Fout! Bladwijzer niet gedefinieerd.**

Eyewitness account from Montezuma \*

Fleshless ones forgive me  
Huichilobos my doubt  
My fallacy that I honoured  
Gave my land who kills me

Over the road of feared  
Worlds war advances  
Me - the harassed one -  
With tribal members  
Having deceased  
Long ago  
Passed away  
Since ancestors  
Invited  
Strict men  
White men  
Required  
From the  
Evil  
House

Warriors beside horses  
Smirk downed  
By a master's hand  
Lying does it  
Makes nice dying  
Desecrating  
Is it not  
Of meat  
Of grief

**Fout! Bladwijzer niet gedefinieerd.**

Free

**Fout! Bladwijzer niet gedefinieerd.**

When I raise myself  
To see the sun  
Shout down the dead  
See darkness  
In men of  
Cortés-sabre  
Who wounded  
The brave  
Slew the  
Faithful  
Ones

In my priests who on  
The temples decapitate  
The strangers, then  
The oracle statue  
Dissolves a  
Network around  
Cortés, it  
Dictates  
Threat

I lift a hand  
Demand departure  
Leads your mission  
To dismantling  
Comes lava unto you  
And the suits  
Of armour  
Cortés-gasping  
Know your borders  
Read the heavens

**Fout! Bladwijzer niet gedefinieerd.**

My dread  
Fills your track  
By day  
And knows you  
As Huichilobos

**Fout! Bladwijzer niet gedefinieerd.**

His life  
Eludes you  
Terror-son  
Hernan Cortés  
He already  
Wipes off  
Your face  
Harvests of  
Advanced age  
Excess growth

Consider  
Pronouncing  
These words  
I die oppressed  
Herald coming  
But after my action  
Only my demise  
Heralds First God

Hailed  
Huichilobos  
You react  
With incursions  
And pretence  
Gives control over  
Servile volcanoes  
Maintains the restless  
Abandonment in the heart  
Of your fiery servant

**Fout! Bladwijzer niet gedefinieerd.**

Sway them  
Mixed up with you  
Perilous but strong  
You have in your hands  
Who got a preferential  
Killing on the causeways  
My sigh is heard late leaving  
Such soil for inconsolable grief  
And even that goes off already

Fix Huichilobos with skeletons  
The bottom of tribes to you devoted  
With grief your thoughts desire  
With Cortés your stucco steps

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**Fout! Bladwijzer niet gedefinieerd.**



The revenge of the Mexican mothers

Next are your sons in silence, dead and tried  
Too soon amidst the earthly vegetation  
The Spaniards brag about the operation  
The flower of the nation will be dried

No time for grease to be to swords applied  
The savage first be part of Christ's salvation  
Relax not, mothers, prove your reprobation  
And base en bloc the underground tonight

The females carry out their pious job  
Are sheltered by the veils about the skies  
Dark shadows through the area proceed

A badgered mother gives the quickest lop  
When in the camp the men unlock their eyes  
They drowsily her metal handshake meet

**Fout! Bladwijzer niet gedefinieerd.**

Eyewitness account from Huichilobos

As if you  
Payed out  
My rope  
Montezuma  
To tighten it  
On the spot  
You served me  
Then lost yourself  
As in a dream  
In the arms  
Of a monarch  
Cunning  
One Carlos

I am fumed  
At a king  
Who has ground  
Land unfilled  
For those who  
Are in a position  
To dislocate  
My arms  
And inhale  
Rapacious  
Monsters

They steal sulphur  
From the side  
Of my volcanoes

**Fout! Bladwijzer niet gedefinieerd.**

For firing weapons  
I expell bloody  
Staking faithful ones  
In spite of  
Villages  
Innovators

At the Spanish  
Court Cortés  
The predicted one  
Fetched a cheque  
To bearer  
Convertible  
Into countries

The pope  
Earlier pled  
Protected  
Against risks  
Disconcerted  
The encashment

Freedom  
Food  
Fun  
With such treasures  
Piles of hangers  
Chain  
Rulers  
Of crystal  
The skulls  
Of gold

**Fout! Bladwijzer niet gedefinieerd.**

And silver  
Filagree crowns  
Sovereigns  
Feathered  
Haltered

I foresee that  
Cortés perishes  
Like I  
Ditched you  
Montezuma  
Who on the edge  
Of the roof  
Of his palace  
In Tenochtitlán  
Lost  
His support  
That was  
I

\*

Behold  
This shows what  
Flexes Montezuma  
Nations follow  
Cortés just  
Uses my name  
This is  
My deadfall

\*

**Fout! Bladwijzer niet gedefinieerd.**

Have I not warned  
You there  
Prepared for me  
Deity-deceiver  
Asked to give  
Cortés the go-by  
Via the tongues  
Of my priests  
Who form oracles  
From hearts  
Syphoned  
From bodies

Now that  
I am  
A deity  
Of wax  
Who falls  
On the spear  
Of a European peer  
Does not endure  
The ill-disposed  
Is intent on revenge  
I say die  
If it has to  
Whoever has had it  
Does dying good

Perhaps you grasp  
Those Castilians  
Unsympathetic

**Fout! Bladwijzer niet gedefinieerd.**

Violating bans  
Under my tread  
I undermine  
Everyone firmly  
In their eyes  
I am to blame  
Who lets himself be  
Killed by strangers  
Trusted ones

From the azure heaven  
I come on demand  
Consulters with  
Razor-sharp questions  
Whetted on me  
Suffocate me  
With their smoke pipkins  
My face burns  
Sceptics  
I renounce  
Ordained priests  
Run up guilt

I rule  
Divulge Cortés  
Nor adorers  
My considerations  
Do you wish  
To examine  
My chest  
Then come  
Approach

**Fout! Bladwijzer niet gedefinieerd.**

Quickly  
Closer

But fear  
This is the day  
That I trap everyone  
On the upland plain  
Scatter  
On the acres  
Thanks to you  
My heart  
Everything is tired

Me you preferred  
Not to follow  
Do you repent  
That fallacy  
Then resign yourself  
Under my hand  
Choose  
Or lose  
Or I will  
I must  
Speak  
Always  
Eternally

**Fout! Bladwijzer niet gedefinieerd.**

Eyewitness account from a soldier (I) \*

"Push off", said Cortés by the quayside in Trinidad. It was this what gave his men hearts, the common word. Just as offhanded had we gone up the gangway, to Yucatan. To heaven and hell it was an embarkation. Never to lose it again, hear how weapons penetrated our brothers, what we lived through after Cortés addressed us by the wharf.

Twelve ships undulating like snakes follow the coast with leaking bottoms. At their approach the sun goes to sleep, in a stripy shirt, sound for a whole nation. The fleet moors with legends as conspirators, with priests, their hearts a-flutter at the vision of new papists. Serene is the victim, observed from the bridge. We claim it for god and king. Anchor cables rattle, iron fingers of Spain reach for the sand. Over the railing tractable men effortlessly jump. When leaving the ship they lose no second to shilly-shallying. Planters of the flag, stumbling along haulers of hawsers, terminate weariness by giving the nation the first fatal stab. Here fate forms a freakish mould of colliding cultures, courage and fear. Grumpy grandes command to pitch a camp. Six hundred in number is of victory the ace, a drowsing continent the startled haul. We, demigods, shall gods dethrone, make an old civilization subject to foreign rule.

In Tenochtitlán the Aztec Montezuma has his seat, has on his leash tribes and many monarchs, commands in coombs and valleys ears and eyes. Couriers respectfully bring distressing news, about strangers pronouncing to be thirsty for his throne. Predictions bear whites, whites pave ways. Thus ancestors cross the present. Never had been known this wailing, ascending to heaven. Affliction upon affliction, wound made upon wound.

Armed and packed, travelling on royal permits, come those from far who as rulers take hills and valleys, chopping down images, gathering raw and wrought gold. The attentiveness of blind horses it seems, the magnetism of immortal deeds it proved to be. Pious padres like crusaders pull down idols. They too bite with their countenance into the ground. Strong gods whose kindling golden masks fill the holds of the launches, piled up. From ignorant priests comes salt in the wound and from hidalgos hindering mandates; honouring Indians many times, different than with knick-knacks.

**Fout! Bladwijzer niet gedefinieerd.**



The secretive and stinging squabbling of the gods brings my companions almost to their knees. God, deep in my heart hurts the arrow so much which my ribs keep clasped like jaws. Repeatedly "Santiago" is called for Spanish glory. Madre de Dios, all those tears are now available, the sons of our country so low now, weak and prizeable. The fact is, they have been beaten out of horse-saddles and flail about wildly, like vanes. Arrows enter chests uninvited. It is quiet for a second, then bodies fall, exhaling a final syllable. Oh, like an uncaged bird I left my ground, flapped my wings of excitement and got finished up here merely for this sobbing and biting with eyes in Mexican sand.

Cortés draws his charts, big, liny, from his seat carefully indicating each and every dead man. More of my comrades fall according to that strategy. The end of the uncoiled charts is not in sight. The cooks imperturbably simmer food in the kettle. Recalcitrant, resisting being cut down; that takes until they will yet lose their heads in that stew-pot. But Cortés, we see him place all those lines, drawn from a Castilian feather. Powerfully he speaks words to officers, in silence. The warriors cause him anxiety, him and other commanders, serious faces, attentive. And his soldiers, vassals of him almost, he tries to talk round later, after reflecting.

The food did not taste. Up to three times. Three times we took our heels into the marsh. Nobody have I seen eating again who just now ate at the same board as I. So further down nobody of them extricated himself from that absurdity. A down to earth Cortés just imparted us all that the last attack decimated his army.

Courses almost impassable defy the arms of the giant in the capital. From the upland plains they haughtily descend to the camp below. To assure themselves of paying their respects in the palace of the illustrious one, Spanish noblemen provide Montezuma's messengers with communications. After this we put them in their old footsteps without wasting words. Once out of sight, those instructed by Cortés hasten back to the city troubled, over the mountain ridge and breathless. After their arrival they diligently spread out the drafts. Reproductions of strangers drawn from likenesses shock, become alive. Montezuma still holds court. Here, standing in a circle, bent over the effigies, everyone is lonely. Still being home one is

**Fout! Bladwijzer niet gedefinieerd.**

homeless. To order, Cortés is decelerated with gold and jewels. But the flower of the conquerors has opened up abundantly.

Dumbfounded, Montezuma sacrifices people on a block of stone. Recommended by Huichilobos to keep out Maria he is obliged to do it. His god says so from a pedestal and preferably he should shun Cortés. The Aztec hardly needs incitement to learn obedience. He anticipates to unuttered entreaties of the gods; when he took office he voluntarily swept the steps of the temple.

Aztec tax amassors subjugate. With embellishment, in their hand roses and a bent rod, they wander from village to village. A visitation. In a pestered region we are witness and behold: they scoar the whole area for gold, ware, women and more and Montezuma they call their master. Hardships and hardly any haul to be rich, make many amongst us think about turning back. Hernando, in anticipation of fragmenting troops, thinks up a trick, pretends that woodworm preys on his launches. He has them consumed by fire. If the ships seem to be surprised by woodworm already, even worse has moral degradation affected the fleet. In the face of furious tribes we stand. In the rear lies the sea unenterable in earnest now. We create Villa Rica de la Vera Cruz from nothingness. Conquering by anchoring. Land extension is to Spaniards a déjà vu. For Villa Rica our kingdom be substituted: soil having been taken over and base of operations at the same time.

This day the rain has seized its opportunity, drenched us. Marching kits chafe shoulders, gambesons, backs. Fever struck with delusions Cortés and officers. At the crack of dawn plains will resonate with cries. Tomorrow Tlaxcala must defend its houses against us who triumphed today, troops, turn out the men against us. Tlaxcalans are cannibals. Cramped for space in cages sit, having got rounded up in neighbouring cities, their enemies, fattened up. Whoever is not sacrificed, is eaten. Cortés opens the doors, a human cowshed does not square with his morals. Those who escape the carnage do not wonder if life without bars always offers freedom...

Montezuma deliberates, hesitates and considers himself beleaguered by priests of meat and wooden gods. Those in legends denominated rightful ones, but at his word feared by

**Fout! Bladwijzer niet gedefinieerd.**

Huichilobos' unquestioning faithful ones, approach the plateau. Ironed bearers of bad news. The ruler is doomed to lonely hold his ground between heaven, earth, ordained and subject.

Today another enemy saw the light. Dishes, gold of ornaments, jewels big, were pulled back and forth by us. In the distance Popocatepetl gives away resentment, when it thrusts hot steam to the sky. Avarice cleaves our army like from Troje's horse, that in our camp gives birth to self-evident discordants. A party covered with dust, showers us with gifts but is not prompt with victuals. Dreams fade of undisturbed marching. Nobles considering like conspirators, whisper with empty stomachs, weary, overcome by sleep and hunger. Cortés sends Tenochtitlán's henchmen away from the tents and the army camp. With veiled threats.

Then after consultation comes proudly and manfully Montezuma - under a baldachin with green coloured feathers, stitched with silver and gold, pearls and green stones - on sandals of the most precious metals. Descends to the ground that has been swept to honor him. On rugs he puts his feet. Around him I see servants, deferential in casting down their eyes. There stand an envoy of a god and an envoy of a king. During the illustrious audience the din of arms dies down a bit too long, orchestrated in major by two conductors. Montezuma laments, disconcerted urges Christian clemency with Cortés. Huichilobos sees himself undergo a divine death, done to him through the hand of a worshipper.

As a blind mistress Tenochtitlán-Mexico receives Hernando. Montezuma, standing on the apex of the temple, shows Cortés of the town its depth. In their backs stand Tlaloc and Huichilobos, gods, while I imagine that the warrior says: "I shall give you all this, malinche Cortés, when you adore the two on this landing." But refuses Cortés' Mary-statue on the spot, as if he considers her misplaced in his slaughterhouse. On their long hair the priests wear caps, coagulated it is by clotted blood. Unfathomable red-black is the expression in their eyes through the fire that Huichilobos lit in them. Unknown it is to me what rages in their dubious chests. Furthermore, shall we not be happy, be charming in our work, full of the bliss of the Roman Catholic Church? Now, what stops the sovereign from giving our hearts to the gods in a haste? To satiate them with haste with a strategist? The officers ignite. It is none too soon that Montezuma is summoned to the Spanish billets; dictated there to hold court, no wait, entreated. Through anguish and the semblance to be guest the monarch feels himself a

**Fout! Bladwijzer niet gedefinieerd.**

puppet. He groans, placed in shackles of predictions.

Gold does not slumber undisturbedly long in a treasury. The Aztec lord gives it magnanimously the Spanish one. Cortés compensates himself from that for expenses. His personal losses amounted to a considerable sum. He works on his own crown in this sublunary world. When he nurtures his tight-fistedness like this, he incurs displeasure, but those grouching and whoever connives he persuades mellifluous.

From ships having arrived later, Narvaez brings smallpox along with him, an irresistible weapon. For the new Spain Pandora had even that in her box. Over the province the illness fans out unheeded. The viruses instantly hold their own campaign: the smallest conquistadores of the continent, equally content with non-immune Indians and with us. Immediately Narvaez presumptuously disputes Cortés' charter but, blind in one eye, falls into his clutches. Hernando, let in on machinations via spies in time, at night visited Narvaez' notorious pains in the neck, at whom he had every fusil fired surprisingly. Malinche cashes. On his unlimited authority Narvaez' men change their flag disinherited. Hardly has Narvaez' miserable remnants been conscripted without words being wasted, when coming from the landscape that contains corners and holes, Indians jump up, met by Cortes' battle wagons. As often before, collective danger forces antipodes to cooperate, here makes Spanish folk amalgamate to affinity. The Aztecs prepare themselves; in the sight of celebrating, their wild, greedy animals have not been fed for two days already. The arms unanimously around each other I drag away my dead brother, clung to me. Endless eyes look into the midamerican night. Pale with lost blood sinks the body into the pit. That way he is no predator forage. Cortés just came to disclose confusing that he ran short of people, to fill holes ...

After struggle we once more head for the capital. While Cortés was absent, an officer under mandate expected during festivities insurrection. Rashly he put merry-makers to the sword. Too late: the seed of agitations in that deed. Hear the people! who blame this on Montezuma's weakness who too long already gave spurious strangers grace. In the upheaval the general remains skilful, prevails upon Montezuma to speak from the roof, who from the edge tries to admonish his people to be calm. Enemies escort, compatriots hem him in. What jams from two sides tames every king. Completing debasement, fate accomplishes treacherousness

**Fout! Bladwijzer niet gedefinieerd.**

which is an aid to him, disrupter of realms. With woebegone visage Montezuma mounts the roof. When he turns to a threatening audience the brim of his cloak comes to a standstill. Affectionately he is an advocate of peace. Such oral pleading hardly gives him stones. Three hit him on the arm, leg and head mortally. Literally one does not lay violent hands on one's own principal.

There is nothing now that keeps us in Tenochtitlán. Our camp must get away, swiftly away from this place. In the Noche Triste the retreat takes place. Our shadows, fleeing with army and materiel over the causeway, are the first to escape from the city. Then the silence is broken. Priests wail signals which come from shell horns. When cooled down we settle into our stride, hordes have been drawn up in battle array. The wind is silent, apart from that everything howls. Soldiers plated as with iron shrouds, fight with Indians under paling stars. Obscure, brilliantly they tumble over each other. Thus meet their end who tamed the oceans. In three feet of ground, gained over both camps, scavengers are jubilant about accomplished catastrophes. A pick of troops late crosses the maizefield. Never did the night dress like this in a frock of flames of red colour, yellow and orange, green. Pass on the story about strangers who dare to go on four legs with the lance alongside. Between the up and down going messengers of heavens we undertake the deplining of gods. Promising suns come up and I observe their going down. Festive that shine, but what a blood. Cuirasses polished, later buried in the sand with men. They have met death in those heavy suits, hauled this iron from Spain, wore it proudly. Do not drag it back but leave it here with substance.

Daughters of Montezuma and provincial kings stay lifeless behind on the bridges. The fine fleur of Tenochtitlán inhales, clenches its fist at the withdrawing Cortés, looks at our fleeing backs in an instant. Whimpering amassed on the country road to Tlaxcala, we eat dead horse on the way, starved. The enemy shows itself an adept in the hiding of its ambushes, laid everywhere as death on demand. With javelins and arrows, as pigs with prickles, Indians jump on us by violence. With disregard for death a struggle is settled between cultures. And in the annals of the hotbed many proudly map personal affliction. Wailing, left behind wounded, cease lamentations, they pass away. As if the king made it. The ships are stiff with skeletons crammed together, the dead men and the famished. And loaded with treasures. The rafters creak, masks glitter of Aztec gods in the hold, dark. As on wings from the barges men,

**Fout! Bladwijzer niet gedefinieerd.**

being after spoils, hasten inland.

We know how to cope with pertinacious tribes. On the village squares is stirred up the iron. It is driven into the villagers' faces. This is illustrative. When the brandmark 'war' searing settles in a tortured one, when the visage smokes, protests weaken. This proceeding bends proclaimed antagonists, persuaded too hastily. A punitive expedition sets off and fines Zocotlá to avenge ourselves for those who were killed amongst our party. Abandoned by their bearers lie panoplies of Spaniards, scattered. Once again the slaves made are marked by the iron, to break resistance. A fifth worth of royal tribute is put aside, but the rest of it escapes us.

Around a temple blows wind, sighing. Heads are pallid, waiting for discovery in a row on the altar, with torsos absent. The sun has set, light plays inside wraithlike. Those waiting to be rescued by comrades lost body and limbs prematurely. In the light of the moon no battle is carried out by them anymore. The valiant successor of Montezuma, Guatemoc, butchers a number of our men, sends round their heads and limbs through his tracts. Resisting Aztec supremacy is, that is his message, insalubrious. But those who have borne the yoke for centuries, will have nothing more to do with their ruler now.

Cortés wages war against hostile intestines and emaciates who does not want to die from weapons. Feverish stand angular faces. Fervent ones on a horseback mow, swaying the sword, the starving ones like grain. For seventy-five days death dwells frosty and chilly as a guest in Tenochtitlán. He will succeed and Cortés gathers in many sheaves for him. We construct thirteen ships behind the lines; this weapon carves pathways in Mexico's lake. Now or never it is, will it become our land or tomb. All neighbouring tribes show courage one more time. Annihilation waits, maybe immortal honour. Now show who keeps the combined ones of immeasurable number from the breakthrough, our profit, the collapse of the town. Penetrating screams, encouraging. A wounded conquistador groaningly exposes his valiance. Escaping yourself, being no offering, that pleases. A restricted and furtive delight, shrouded by suffering. On the other hand, whoever kicks around the overrunning dominion must unlearn it. We sing a battle song, we rule. Be cut down, or then be not. Horses with listless, sagging backs tramp along, watered with water and in the blood are drifting Indians looking

**Fout! Bladwijzer niet gedefinieerd.**

distraught into my eyes.

Onwards we step, a day as none before wore on, on the battlefield where Spanish fury raved. We carried wet blankets in the encampments, victims of warriors, the elements and hunger. I feel sorry for the horses. They wildly speak subservient the language of their lords. They carry their masters to meet an arrowhead, transport them to the enemy. Such is their nature. The Aztecs make off with them for the feast to eat. Cries for help are on all sides, nothing can escape that walks into this theatre surrounded by deceased. At the banging of the drum priests open chests, after which in accordance with ancient traditions and ritually, blood is shed, the heart torn out amidst great uproar. It is an oblation. Aztec gods try to cut a dash with foetal Christianity. A miracle it is that poor devils lack, whose bodies are hurled from high flights of steps. The Aztec realm falls later in time. From the temple resounds the war drum, Tenochtitlán teaches trespassers manners. It sacrifices Spaniards to Huichilobos. They are slaughtered, skinned, immolated and eaten, and their remains thrown for wild animals. Those are not like their master who has no fighting spirit. Unthinking they swallow an enemy that is hard to take.

Guatemoc avenges the embroiling triggered on Cortés' authority, once again assaults everything that is Spanish and hated. When the ships of his enemy sail practically together, Montezuma's heir under threat of death is impelled to escape in a boat. With wife, friends and the ones from the state. A launch intercepts and boards the shelter on the lake. On the water we deprive Mexico of its final monarch. Led before Cortés Guatemoc asks the favour of being killed, encounters aversion. As a cunning means to subjugate a nation, one preferably does not kill its leaders, gives them estates. To personally watch over the Spanish general on his travels, we coerce Guatemoc to abide at his side with further fights. The rain comes, Cortés spurs his horse to Coyoacán. A dreary horizon devours the most terrifying couple of Mexico.

It is the thirteenth of August, but winter for Aztecs. Fifteen hundred and twenty-one is the year of our Lord, but the years of their own Lord are numbered. We pushed out priests with oblations; now let Huichilobos operate in this land with his hands tied. Cracking does Mexico stop. The sun resigns under protest in the west.

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Light heavily bids farewell.

(\*) publication  
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**Fout! Bladwijzer niet gedefinieerd.**



## Eyewitness account from a soldier (II) \*

Full of grace twelve ships have arrived. At last the distance has been covered. With that the race for Christian progress is run to the advantage of the crusade. The general stealthily skirts the bays; the enraptured army joins him. It has drifted too long at the sea already, the banner has stood on deck too long. Harassing the ancient coast in their hundreds, the soldiers end up on the spot of the ancient people. Offshore watches overseeing the field-glass of the general. There stand the high-spirited confederates, led by Cortés as their potentate. He is, although the king did not give him a mandate, out for benefit, preferably of gold.

The rumour of the arrival of Quetzalcóatl, read in antique times from Huichilobos' countenance before the historic endeavour, goes far ahead of the monarchists. Blackbearded men of the ocean were said to come from the east, soaked with powers conceded by God, but sail as nationals of Spain. They who never before contended with natives, come as the inheritance-empowered sovereigns and try to create history, which rather created them.

Artillery and provisions are discharged. Outside we pile up these prerequisites of victory, which steadily develop to tools of destiny and the moral burden of many generations. After the prow of the ships has been lashed to poles and Cortés gave home a moment's thought, he brings his soldiers, officers, his martyrs together. His brothers in arms who have headed for their Eldorado, he addresses, prepares for the confrontation. With rhetoric he ushers them into the massacre.

And now our army unsuspectingly sets foot in the nidus of the deadly ones, of the cannibals, the territory of unparalleled horror, erratic and atrocious. Not yet aware of numerous dangers we begin a holy conversion journey. The Christian cross provisionally wrought, and idols just knocked from their pedestals. However, we land-attackers quickly perceive with what enemy the battle starts here: whoever is captured by the Aztec on the battleground, meets his end before the images of a god.

The need for preservation of body and mind puts us off our stroke. The artillery is fired warm without hesitation; the hope of peaceful work ends up in smoke. Abrasively the roar of

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cannons mars the dream to make a name as the Lord's Anointed. The soul does not fall into our lap just like that and paradise is nipped in the bud. In this hour of defeat and death the Indians reach for their arrows, bewildered by the unbridled fire that is shot through their houses whizzing. When the opposition of the villagers becomes visible, comes the order to strike them down sanguinary, as an example for the prevalent tribes and as a caution to every inhabitant.

The little Mexican mother just now saw her child slain through Christianity, has struck her hands before her mouth. Atrocious godheads go round! We have cut no half acre-sheaf but plucked entire fields. A shoot is not offered a new chance and the people are pulled out by the roots. What fifteen centuries of Christianity are capable of doing, is shown this woman in such a time; the quickest way to estrange the souls was found by Europe's sword, stabbed in the heart. The chieftains deliberate on site with all the shaken people and with the army, armed to the teeth, but not against Spanish taints.

The godhead must be warned at once. Therefore the persons in charge of the tribes get ready. Hanged on with provisions for many days, they call on the god of the Indian, Montezuma. When they march through deserted areas, they are informed by shocked and panic-stricken people how Spanish armies raised hell, charged with not a few atrocities. How subdued villages have been disbanded, how the oppressor has taken women by surprise, has driven the brandmark 'war' into the face and how the fire devastatingly reduced houses to ashes.

In Montezuma's royal quarters his general staff receives with anxiety from here and there run-downs and emissaries. Partly strangers travel to and fro. The riot becomes steadily visible. Districts are put on the chain, the indigene is dislodged, war is declared on recalcitrant ones. Christianity, which has not forgotten its mission, invades the hard way innocent land, where myriades are astounded that Mexico's hand is totally paralysed. When Montezuma's ears have been saturated and the terrified nation has opened its heart, when the godhead Huichilobos has been consulted, the Aztec defers his judgment as he has been swung back and forth.

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The priests advise him war: the warrior should have the signal for the attack rung out and instantaneously give Malinche Cortés the coup de grâce. But Montezuma weighs the prophecies, the bearded cause terrible fright. Are they the truly chosen men that he has to let go by divine decree? The pantheon surprises him to a large extent: upon bearers of blood that is greatly removed from him, it confers unlooked-for favours at every turn, like gods only grant worshippers. Orders not to slacken the Spaniard leave the palace and show that doubt in the Indian ruler has had inauspicious results. Not in time he takes high-spirited steps, too late Spain's true nature is seen through. The hesitation to revenge the victims is regretted by the entire nation.

Finally the assault is undertaken.

We, the enemy, are to be brought to a halt. Seldom did thousands in war foster this with greater disregard for death. Aztec warriors proceed through the planes, upset and feathered and lethally painted, compelled as they are by the fatal conspiring of priests and of gods, for whose purpose one perishes. They thrust themselves upon us with blood-curdling cries, every halberd. No living creature is kept clear of in the process, nobody is spared merciful. In the whole country a missive of Montezuma is going around in which he announces in threatening phraseology that the towns have to support the capital, for otherwise endless suppression is in store. His own does he have in mind with that.

To keep up appearances Tenochtitlán in the meantime sends posthaste its ambassadors in the name of Montezuma to the white men. They pray Cortés to accept their gifts but are seldom generous with food. Enraged because of this secret defiance Cortés advises them in plain speech, the king to report his choler and give an account of his intended vengeance. As our general is of the opinion that grandiloquence should not be founded on empty reasons, he is bent with his staff on a means to exact support from the villages, regard from the incumbent administration.

Divide and rule: motto from old Europe. This unbeaten affliction remedy Cortés breathes new life into for his god and king, the Indian he breathes death into. Those who daily have to endure the strap of the capital that levies hard taxes he promises to liberate from the yoke,

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provided that he shortly finds them on his side. The people, tormented, are faced with a heavy task. They have to choose between a double evil: to discharge the dissension of the capital or to comply, become slaves of a foreign state. The Indian seniors go aside, overcome by the thunderous violence. Afraid to antagonize the near hero, village after village takes side with Cortés.

Thus begins jerking the inevitable amalgamation of two totally different cultures, out of necessity found their shared interest. In the beginning thirty, forty thousand conquistadores and faithful followers move on in harmony shoulder to shoulder and wounded. At the horizon the capital ogle already. Tenochtitlán does not remain idle, scuppers running high the advance and digs a grave for hordes of unnamed. Not without a heavy loss the main force saves itself.

Whoever is caught alive, be prepared for severe punishment. The desperate prisoned men are brought before the awful idols, are forced to ritual dances; then slaughtered like gentle animals. The Aztec gods demand every scrap. Their sway divulges an ancient contrast, formed by old cultural values and a caste of priests bemused past help. Blood-besmirched and grimy bodies heartless hit the knife into the chest and thus the corpus disappears head-over-heels into the depth. The limbs chopped off with obsidian, the head lost, behold, the curtain for Spanish glory comes down. The torso has been taken as a victor's meal, the head displayed before Huichilobos.

Our team, exotic troops, move past volcanoes and march into every temple. There the hewn off soldierly heads of those who arrived earlier, rubberneck without twitching a muscle on the altar. Cortés holds converting the infidel to Catholicism an elevated chore, but the nobleman does not consider it his task to descend into hell for that. Horror hits his exhausted troopers: what phantom fate embraces the band of friends! In the ranks the anxious question presents itself whose god unerringly has mercy upon whom.

Our army wrestles on unflinching, scorched by the sun, flooded with rain, burned we go, whom illnesses overpowered and in no way the perseverance supercooled. The rain soaks the heavy armour, heaven hurtles down its disfavour and tries to wipe away the shame of

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centralamerica's violated honour. As from heaven galleons come with more progress, a fresh force from Spain's far and safe territories, with weapons as freightage and food and men.

With strength the capital is now charged by a hundred thousand men in many-coloured plumage. Tenochtitlán, fought against by its own people and by men on four legs, finds itself faced with a vast force. With Cortés rides amidst his mates the choice selection of many an autochthonous confederate. It has been exacted from many villages and this alone makes Spain's armed forces great. When Cortés tries to force the entrance to the town he unlatches concerted resistance. He resolves to starve out everyone if need be, but with this saddens himself most of all. He hopes to soften Montezuma.

Grinding his teeth the warrior witnesses it. The old realm is shattered under him while the gods no longer sympathize with him. In bitterness he determines not to bend, because despite everything the main capital will fall, the leader die amidst it and with the hour the number of fatalities increases. Then becomes clear the toll of our strategies. Grim the Indian opposes them, bleeding to death of enemy swords.

The Aztec nation breathes its last gasp. By the blind-alley outcome affected, its master resigns himself. With restrained tears he succumbs to Hernando; Mexico's magnificence has had it. Dismayed Montezuma's phrases sound. From the roof he adjures fatigued his people to outlaw war at once, in order that the Spaniards leave the town. His words fall on stony ground and adherents lay violent hands on him. Mortally he is hit by stones.

The whole of the old country dies with this sovereign.

The danger for Cortés has not yet been averted. His worry is now to assist his remitted army, whose chance to escape threatens to become lost through old and new wounds. Aztec nobility eating its heart out with grief makes preparations for renewed combat and designates Guatemoc for guarding all against a new disaster. The orphaned land chooses him as its leader and imposes on him the unuttered obligation to revenge the blow of Montezuma's death, and en passant Huichilobos' disregarded judgment. But Cortés leads the final offensive and dislocates the opponent.

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He lays hands on Guatemoc after which he arrests him in his ship with family and all, magnanimously grants him the sceptre and allocates provinces to him. The leader of the land is on his knees, settled the debt to Huichilobos. The day is thirteen in the month of August and fifteen hundred and twenty-one counts the year. The time of doubt is over. The gods exchange one hero for the other ...

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## Eyewitness account from a captain

### I.

I am at a loss what to do with the death of Montezuma. As an officer in the army of Hernando Cortés I could have my pick of commendable engagements. Battles with which I now feel overfed. A loyal soldier must be cut out for this work, but we do not know when to stop. Loyal because I descend from a noble family that originally does not come from Spain to be sure, but has been domiciled there for such a long time already that it has become on friendly terms with the Spaniards, even has gained some influence.

My foreign birth did not form an impediment to share in the rights and duties of the imperium. Neither was it a hindrance for my present commission that ever I was assigned to a high office and had connections with the court. The treason that I am more or less about to commit with my pen, for this reason loads down my conscience. Add to this the pressure that I receive from my father confessor who, instead of giving the consolation that I was so much in need of, tries to dissuade me from my intention very understanding although obstinately. Then my burden has been characterized.

He evinces little emotion for the word of the Father of the Church that I impress him with: "This is the fruit of these confessions, not about how I have been, but about how I am. And this is why I am about to do these confessions, not only before you, (...) but also before the ears of the mortals who believe me, (...) the partners of my mortality, my fellow citizens and travelling companions, people who precede me, come after me and together with me are on the way."<sup>1</sup>

A plan that possibly will not only disgrace my general later, but already his field servant in the present. Cortés, because it is to be expected that he can no longer defend himself later. Me, because I refrain from taking heed of his needs in the thick of the battle. For it is not

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<sup>1</sup> St Augustine, Confessions, Book 10,-IV,6

called in question by anybody in the camp that a many-headed dragon has been sent to us against which it is bad to stand up. Should not we all fare like this? But first let me sketch how we have come this far.

## II.

When land began to dawn I already got a sneaking feeling - equipped as I was with the acquired intuition of an ex-serviceman - that I did not approach the spot which, as we had been assured, would invite Spaniards. Standing in the dazzling light of our conviction we thought to be able to walk down a red-carpet that would instantly lead us to the target. It seemed that with the wind behind we set foot on that carpet. But we went off into nothingness. The slight nausea aroused by the continuous wiggling of the boat has - as it appeared - not even had a symbolical meaning for me. A symbol may be expected to have some connection with the original, the idea of which it is the reflection, not only as to its nature but also as to its effluvium. Let me honestly ask myself: how could the higher forces make the inferno that I have seen later, precede by nausea, clench it to a slight corporal discomfort?

The territory was quietly waiting for us, not aware of the feet that hesitatingly touched it and presently would try to crush it with great violence. The boxes with clothes and victuals were put ashore. To that end many a man had to get soaked, not unwelcome to temper a heated heart, be it short-lived. The first meal that we enjoyed at the coast, made me think of the short rides on a horseback which I made as a child in the mountains, with my parents, brothers and sisters. While papa and mamma provided us with fresh fruit and sausages with some bread, we children imagined, with the innocence of those for whom the world is a garden of delight, to have the only provisions in the world at our disposal. While the wind brushed our hairs and we gazed over the hilltop down into the vale, we seemed to be the absolute sovereigns of every farm. Whoever mowed, down there on the field, mowed for us. Whoever was bent down under a heavy burden, was bent down under our coat of arms.

I have just thought of this greatness while the ship's cook nudged me and handed me my daily ration. There we sat, some being blue with cold, some feverish, the one exuberant, the other dolefully pored over his bowl. Where were the days of my youth? Here everybody

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toiled and nobody carried our weight. And mowing we had to do ourselves too: bodies.

### III.

The class of people that we carried along with us and brought to these parts, we could have replaced by granite without worrying about the difference. Hernando stored the soldiers on lower deck to hide them from the sun. He might have intuited that the Sun of the Aztecs would bring them in the open soon enough. They are remote from me and I from them. Few of our ship's company have known the blessing of a sheltered bastion, like constituted for me by my family.

Where has gone the nobleness of the intellect, the challenge to even out differences of the mind with the weapon of the refined demurs? It is not accommodated on lower deck. I find it in the few folios that I drag along and the possession of which I value more than the sword that I carry. But my kindred spirits are dead men themselves. I speak with them as in a monologue. Or rather, they carry out a monologue against my ready ears. And thus, desolate as I am, I have to find the only pleasant company in already dead persons who from the grave try to tell me in which affairs real life is found. When I endorse their lessons, I have to do it in silence. When we hold different views, they cut themselves off.

Dosed in my own pace I have their wise counsels dispel my peril. But what is a master worth who has to wait for the sparse moments when his pupil says: "Yes, speak now, for now I can hear you. I have put my weapons against the oak. Instruct me between two sword gashes." Or: "Not just now. I am busy coming nearer to your side in this battle." And: "Come back as soon as I survive and, because of that, are farther away from you than ever."

### IV.

The moments of beatific reviewing were scanty. As to the constraint of our mission we were not to make a mistake. We were given no opportunity to come to a divagation in the faith. No time to dream. No time to look back. Too busy we were with the most terrible of dangers, to look ahead. Lashed by the rains, menaced from all sides and kept awake by unknown noises and creatures, we moved from village to village, fighting the conniving of the village foremen who tapped all their resourcefulness to leave us without food; we swatted the insects away

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from us and were expected to add metre by metre to the sphere of influence of the Holy Father. Many of us wanted to return, but not Cortés.

My superior turned out, despite warnings, for the sake of God and king. I have often heard him say it along the way. We can not descend upon a village without him having these words on his lips. God and King, they are selling in Spain like bread and milk. Here they entail the seal of death for ever so many poor souls whom I have seen being sabred, whereas they have done no wrong against nature, God or my sovereign. And then I yet pass over the faithful ones of Montezuma. Those are of a totally different calibre. I shall come to them later. I am talking about the chiefs of the tribes subjected to Tenochtitlán who not instantly take the part of my general, their usurper. When they fall, then at the same time their women fall too - beautiful sometimes - and their children and the other inhabitants.

Until we reached this upland plain nobody has yet been able to explain to me how this can be fitted in in the words of Christ concerning charity. If our world has been thus created that certain categories in it, animals for instance, mollify a cauterized mind, what then brings this mind to the negation of his fellow human being? The hand of the soldier that combs the horse, is the same that hurls the lance into a fellow man. The lansquenet who evinces love to the animal, takes inadvertently action against the infidel. I do not know the mechanism behind this. My father confessor is silent on this point. Maybe his thought at that moment is with his subordination to the government that during my confession I depicted to him as defective. Or does he think of the limitations that are imposed on the human mental grasp when it tries to fathom the higher, divine matters?

V.

I want to leave this force by taking to my heels on a night when the storm weaves me a natural cloak. A more blest way is, that in a foreseeable combat I seek an honorable death. It is a rather uninviting prospect. Remains the desertion, as the clearest proof of my aversion against the whole campaign. But where must I go when I manage to escape from this mountains? There are no courts here where one can offer one's offices. The plants that grow here, are alien to me for the greater part. Of the majority of them I have not seen whether the natives eat them. Haphazardly partaking of what grows along the paths, is too dangerous for

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me. Too often already, I saw the consequences of such an ill-considered harvest. How to support myself while being on the run, is of all these questions not the smallest one. It is an impossible task without a servant to carry humdrum burdens.

Many hundreds of kilometres of traversing unknown and dangerous terrain, off to a coast where only the smoking poles of burned ships still show me the way, is a picture that repulses me not little. Why these ships have been sacrificed I will yet explain. Building a seaworthy ship falls outside the scope of the skills that have been conveyed to me in this life by sympathetic folk. It would disharten me to undertake a physically aggravating work without the prospect of usefully employing it. To get the vessel single-handedly afloat is a work worthy of Hercules. Finding the right course to Spanish heavens would not be unbecoming on Odysseus on the other hand. To have to answer to the court for my unexpected turning up in the native country is the most difficult of all: that requires the slyness of a market vendor.

The chances of returning I consider negligible. Physically I will not easily be capable of withdrawing from this region and its terrors. And what will happen to my soul when I take refuge and am not caught? Because for every body that goes away, also a soul flees from this place. A soul with obligations to the flag that it serves and with a fate that remains unpredictable. Shall I, standing before God's throne, be able to balance the fact that I did not want to increase the suffering of those with whom we are all unfamiliar, against the fact that I became disloyal to my country, to Cortés? Except the technical and corporal facets of an escape to be undertaken, thus a theological problem yet arises. That is a field reserved for the men of God. I can and will not consult them, at least not the oldest among them.

The priests who accompany us, are well-informed about their books indeed. I, who am well able to read, am not yet for that reason capable of examining their pieces of cleverness or invalidating these. One did not school me in logic, and the logic of the sword does not take me to heaven by a roundabout way. Too unpresuming a militia man am I to take a stand against God's assignees. Whose side they are on is known to me in the majority of the cases. They will not be my mouthpiece. By speaking through my pen of the events that affected me most, I shall try to reach posterity. It will read my annotations, long after I have gone in one of the said manners.

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## VI.

In the many big theatres of war that I have set foot in on our venture, I found the attack and the yelling of the victims on both sides striking. Usually I was at the same time unpleasantly struck by the fact that part of my compatriots cannot decently call "Santiago." I am embarrassed that - now that we have come so many miles to establish our realm, to spread the credit of the church and to raise the native to the true faith - we have to do this with those who force out our battle cry lisping through tooth troubles. As if the court listens in, thus I feel humiliated by it. What impression would it make on the inhabitants of our own continent if in hostilities we would meet them in the same way: as inarticulately speaking savages? But fortunately nobody here speaks our language.

I do not want to see the many pitched battles in my mind's eye. There have been too many. Without exception they were a sequence of squalor, pain, fear. Sheer coincidences they were and my own survival is the most apparent evidence of this. One occasion I ought to mention, namely the one in which I lost a dear one.

At the end of March 1519 we moved near Cintla along a marsh. Vermin in all sorts of shape clung to us. For a few of my men with whom I managed to withstand the skirmishes on the spot with a great loss of powers, such soil was fatal. Their wounds remained wet through the great number of times they fell and smirched themselves in muddy ground. I expected that they would contract a non-suppressable fever. My expectation has come true. A strange thought, to see so many men marching vertically for miles and then see them at the end of their journey go suddenly into the ground one by one, one metre horizontally. There was a townsman of mine present, who was firmly determined to come home again. Had I been harder at heart or more despondent, I might have offered him my minor medical knowledge, in exchange for his cooperation with my plans. I kept him in reserve because he was not doing bad enough yet. It was of no avail, for unforeseenly quick he died.

Now let me tell what personal loss I suffered in Cintla. I have made a miscalculation by taking my own horse along with me and snatch it from the stable in which it was accustomed to stay. More than counting on the loss of the altruistic animal through a deadly injury, I saw

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a means in it to carry out my conquests more thorough. As if the natives anticipated my advent; that is how I felt, for when trembling and in fear they spoke about men with four legs, they could never better describe how I felt one with my quadruped. Alas, it was hit and then collapsed under my weight. With the fat that we took from a killed Indian we even treated the flank muscles and the abdominal wall of the riding animal. To no avail. It perished due to too serious bleedings.

When I removed the saddle and despoiled a broken girth to it, I could not hold my tears, for the first time since I had set my footsteps on this pagan land with its deluding temptations. The leather binding upbraided me for not having given my companion at arms the treatment that he might have laid claim to, or having left him the dignity that he possessed in Spain. There he could play against nobles. Here he was hit by the arrow of a native. But these times are eating your concentration, for I lost horses before without complaining about it particularly.

No moment had I thought that the appearance of our cavalymen would produce so much pandemonium. Had we known beforehand what shock the movements, the rotations, the cavorting of the horses managed to stir up in the heart of the native, then I suspect that we had exploited this element of surprise much more and had made use in abundance of a means that in so unreal a way seemed to have fallen into our lap. I then would have wanted to advance that the animals be outfitted with a terrifying mask, and hanged with hides be driven between the savages.

With a bit of imagination we might have created a token with which we could have petrified all the residents of this country. It might have convinced them rapidly of the inevitability of our message. It might have averted bloodshed and to many have given an early perception on the afflictions which, in the life after this life, are prepared for those who do not adhere to the true faith. Had our connection with the autochthons been of a calibre as we were accustomed to in Europa with mutual enemies, and had we had a stationary base of operations, then even a Trojan Horse would have given here a twist to the invasion that we have missed up to now.

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Two of my comrades covered my steed with boughs as if it concerned a soldier whom they had to give some form of tribute. I could not mask my shame that once again I have involved a guiltless creature in the massacre.

## VII.

When Cortés has something up his sleeve - I shall not call him sneaky - I sense this by the way he adapts an attitude towards me. He begins to display genial behaviour, is nostalgic at the same time and goes back to our shared memories. Because I feel that his attitude, if not calculating is yet unwittingly manipulative, I become prickly of his being amicable.

I can add to this that each time he is surprised and slightly grieved when he notices that I answer him grumbly. This manifests a certain innocence with this man, who flings into the fray as a matter of course every means at his disposal to reach his goal. Is he, born leader, aware of it? At such moments I see the folk who in our next cockpit will raise their arms in vain, promptly imitated by a priest who invokes insight for beings who because of their wounds are left no more time to be converted. I cannot feign a disposition that I do not possess, nor disclose Cortés what I have on my mind. After all we have tagged along with one another for a long time, drink from the same mug. What must I say to him who would react to my imputations genuinely disconcertedly? We live in different worlds.

Such a situation occurred when Cortés came to inquire after my horse. In actual fact he seemed to pave the way past which he wanted to lead me in the direction of his plans. These were indicative of a drastic measure. Cortés cajoled me into coming along. As we were walking and talking we made our way to the officers' tent. There the staff turned out to have assembled already. Many issues had to have our attention without delay. Great consternation was caused by a plan that can only originate from the head of a strategist of genius, or from that of a man who has lost every grip of reality.

During the staff meeting about which I spoke, in Cempoala, held under a dubious star, some, among whom Del Castillo, brought forward with Cortés the plan to destroy all the left behind vessels. He rather liked the idea, was in fact himself some time already convinced of the advisability and necessity of a drastic push in the back of his soldiers and officers. I was

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strongly ill-disposed toward it. Cortés gave instruction to set all the ships afire, the way they lay in Villa Rica. Ever since have I been confirmed in my suspicion that then the real seed of my distaste of the expedition was sown.

The cunning old fox did not take into account that many of us had left behind loved ones at home who hoped for our return, that the future had not in the least to be filled with the glory that every one of us fostered in his dreams, that in the utmost emergency we might be cut off from all rescue, and this because of the impetuosity of our own urge for advance. He made it impossible for us to sail away. With the pretext that the woodworm wreaked havoc in the rafters and could not be ousted from its hiding-place, Hernan gave the order to put the fuse into the ships and not to spare them. I felt that we ourselves had rummaged through the country of the native as woodworms and could only be driven away from it with the fire of hell. But there lay also partly our task: to dull the fire of the infidel with the fire of our conviction.

The following evening I wandered over the camp, full of impossible thoughts about a return, while I looked out over the plain. In my restlessness I more or less sincerely resolved to go back to the coast, to search for pieces of suitable wreckage which after their rearrangement might serve me as a ship. That this would take the assistance of our ship's carpenters, that material, ropes and pitch had to be purloined, that such a job could impossibly take place under the eye of the troops, did not matter to me at that moment. It was a thought that I did not allow a long existence. My mind needed something to do. The unbearable thought of a road home being cut off I had to expel at any cost.

I do not like that others give my future an irreversible course. Cortés wanted to go on. There was one cause all the more, why the plan to spur on my weary limbs to compounding a boat could not surpass the stage of a feverish vision. It so happened that I got the order to command the troops some one day and a half. Stay-behinds were unimaginable. Anyone who was not killed penetrated further into the country.

### VIII.

From that moment my relation with Cortés began to cool perceptibly. About three o'clock in

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the afternoon the day after our arrival in Tlaxcala I have gone with him along the cages in which the Tlaxcalans had put their prisoners. It was special to see how these accommodations are made. They need not even be constructed so sturdy. It only takes little to put people behind bars. As soon as a small structure has been equipped with simple strengtheners on the corners and keeps itself upright, it is already fit for putting up a human. In the course of my tour of inspection I heard some shipwrights deliberating whether they would show Cortés how on some components improvements might be introduced, but he whistled to stop the plans.

The cages were thrown open. The poor devils who tumbled out of them, initially could not stretch their limbs and remained kneeled, leaning with their hands on the ground, shaking their heads in lamentations. Contorted they were through the stay in a space that was not designed for their proportions. The sun that had been shining on their bodies mercilessly, had done the rest. Stripped of their unwished-for accommodation they undoubtedly wanted to thank Cortés, were it not that their mental scars stood this in the way and fear had the best of gratitude.

It was a miracle that one had managed to fatten up these people. What in the distressfulness of their unnatural housing was taken in in their intestines had, as I surmised, to disappear again through the strangling fear that one was brought in. This did apply to some prisoners, as far as I could see, unless these had only a short time been accommodated like this and deprived of their freedom. On the other hand there were corpulent types, of whom we could not determine whether they had been behind bars for a long time already, or were afflicted with a voluminous build. Hernando did not want to talk any further about this incident, that he did not fancy. He brushed it aside. He was testy and did not show himself for the rest of the afternoon. Did he suspect something?

## IX.

I found myself in the retinue of Hernando when Montezuma arrived on the road that leads to Tenochtitlán. Despite that we were accustomed to a few things of each other by now, it arrested my attention that Hernan was now beginning to exude a slight perspiration odour. The visit, the enervating day's marches that lay behind us, the notion to be invested between

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unreliable tribes from all sides, did not leave him unperturbed. The whole campaign could depend on what would be interchanged between the two giants. From Cortés' face nothing could be seen. That was not unlike him. In the years that I accompanied my superior I noticed before, that his stony countenance was not so much the result of extreme self-control, but the outward reflection of a man who has been emotionally deadlocked. His clammy forehead betrayed him. Apart from that, he differed in nothing from what I knew.

Montezuma's personality and behaviour had to make an impression and be indelibly printed in our minds. To me it seemed to be quite a tall order for Hernando not to feel at a disadvantage with such a royal attitude, although we are God's ambassadors. For in spite of our supercilious conduct we hardly failed to notice, that here a ruler was brought up who in his realm had at least as much to say as Carlos with us. And this man found himself on his own domain, knew all that lay behind him in the mountains and in the plains. Knew our fate and would be outrun by his own fate yet. The impression that Montezuma made on me, was that here a man leads his people (led, for now he is dead) for whom the legitimacy of his mastery did not raise doubts, gave no cause for prudence or, on the contrary, presumptuous acting. Every moment Huichilobos looked over the Aztec's shoulder and whispered in his ear that he controlled the limbs of this, his earthly vassal. A tremor shook me. This was not Montezuma speaking, but Huichilobos who melted into him. The powers of the dark realm of the gods took over the negotiations.

What should Hernando oppose against this? How could he drive the magnificence of our king and God home to the foreign sovereign? Montezuma could not form an image of the two kingdoms, had never heard of them. If only we could bring some thoughts to life by showing a painting on which the mother country has been registered and our monarch can be seen. The drawing-materials carried along in our ranks, are summary however, have got lost in transit for the greater part - when we tried to save our skin during one of our many escapades - and were brought from Spain to capture the incidents in the region that was to be overrun. We did not intend to show the conquered through drawings how we live. It is an imperfect method to demonstrate them what we represent. Our presence should persuade them, because after all we are here for the Church too.

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The eyes of Montezuma, his assistants, his dignitaries, showed in all their brightness a gleam of mother-of-pearl, as is so often seen in these areas. Our eyes are different. He who gives our men a look, has the feeling to plumb the depths of them. He who gives the autochthones a look, gets the uncomfortable idea that their true thinking lies hidden behind their eyes. As if they may look from the inside to the outside, but conversely do not give entrance to glances that come from the outside. Generally one sees in the eyes of a human being what prompts him. At that moment it was the umpteenth time that we deemed this impossible. A conspiracy? A natural phenomenon? How they assessed us kept us busy.

What if the countenance of these fellows is stony already by nature? In that case I can draw no conclusions from it and is it a puzzle to me how they can among themselves and make a distinction between reliable and unreliable faces. After all, one betrays one's thoughts through an alternation of muscular movements, particularly those of the face. What is for these people the key with which they probe each other's thoughts?

Through the prolix translations of our interpreter it has struck me that the Aztecs describe uncomplicated occurrences with elaborate and ornate words. It is just as if by being as long-winded as possible they try to make up the deficit of outwardly visible emotions and want to hand the person that they have a conversation with, every instrument with which the mind-set of the speaker can be reconstructed. Perhaps quite the contrary they may even want to cut themselves off further than they already procure through their faces. Want to add a little extra, by hiding their true opinion in a forest of words. An exchange of views thus has more of a mental sparring match than of a method to inform each other about a concept in an effective and fast manner.

What shall I say about Montezuma's servants. Our courtiers back home can pattern themselves on it. We had an interesting exchange of ideas with which also a young friar was involved, not the right man for expeditions like these. An ally for my escape plans if they will ever be possible ...? We mainly discussed the topic whether not the devoutness, if it is genuine, indicates the more that it belongs to the poor in spirit. To the really inwardly devoted therefore, who either by tradition or birth, or by inner development, have no knowledge of, or have no need for, underhand doings, intrigues or a special place in the heart of their master.

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Here we saw no sneaky susurrations, knowing nods, belabouring with elbows. What I discerned inspired awe in me. Round the Aztec none of his infantry-men dared to see him directly in the face. Greater regard I never saw before, although some priests round the papal throne have a similar devotion, as one of my companions imparted me.

I cannot say that I continuously felt very comfortable when I looked at Montezuma's servants. In my worst moments I imagined that these masks would at their master's command without any hesitation put an obsidian knife between my shoulder blades. Possibly they agree on an obscure look amongst themselves and heartily laugh behind the scenes about their successful mystification or tactical tricks of the trade. If we ever want to hold our ground here, it is of importance that we know in what way these people communicate in being silent.

## X.

During the encounter on the country road doubt about the supremacy of Montezuma crept up on me. Was it as real as we had taken it into our heads during the study of the plans of attack? Granted, he wore gold embroidered sandals and had paid his respects hanged with jewels and wrapped in rare feathers, but this did not have to be the reflection of a position of power that transcended that of a regional noble, the likes of which we call liege lords in our parts. The stories however that we fished out of our interpreter Marina about the vastness of the regions that Montezuma possesses, made us realize already before the confrontation with the Aztec that the natives are subordinate to him for miles and miles around. They certainly are not in failing health, but sometimes, when the sounds of Montezuma's name reach their ears, throw their hands to their heads. These souls softly sing, turn halfway, alternately brush heaven and earth with their eyes and still have not uttered a word. I have understood them nonetheless. To my cost and not only through my meetings with merchants or travellers, I found out that Montezuma's influence reached farther than that of the morning sun and even now has not been robbed of any of its strength.

This weight does not seem to be caused by great opulence or extensive estates. The natives might be relatively immune for that. I try to picture to myself how in Europe we would handle riches that is there for the taking like fruits, recently fallen from the tree. At the court of Carlos I have come across treasures that ready for use fill the palace buildings. There hall

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after hall is furnished with gold and silver dishes and goblets. The tapestries, the sculpture work, the jewels, they are already there and never seem to have known another environment. It appears to everyone that in their present splendour they were always in store. Who of us at the court gives a moment's thought to the miners who have taken away the valuable gemstones and metals from the earth? How different do the Indians seem to feel here about the superabundance by which they are surrounded every day. But then, they have not lost the contact with nature, from which the precious substances have been dug up.

They create the impression of handling valuables more disciplined than we do. This observation may be based on a wrong inference on my part. But when my experience does not fail me and the Indians do not in their behaviour display a deceptive unconcern, there are several possibilities to explain such an indifference. Back home the gold on account of its scarcity is a very wished for object. In this country, that has liberal supplies of it, it does not play the part of a costly medium of exchange or means of payment. We possess the resources as a prerequisite for our otherwise indeed luxurious life. Here the struggle for life is straighter; and eating, drinking and waging wars rank as more worth striving for. From childhood on we have been raised with the idea that gold is a desirable valuable, but the savages have been brought up with different values. Possibly this explains their attitude.

In Europe we can tell by the look in the eyes of people how much they have an obsession about things that glitter, gleam and clink. The Indian seems to be much more stoical. It is difficult to determine what is on his mind or what passions are going on in his chest. I do not know what sanctions there are on the abuse of scarce possessions, if an abuse of the sort is as such discerned and chastised in a legal sense here. If Montezuma's hand was stern enough, it will by many have spoiled the appetite for thieving something. Maybe it is this through which so many in our camp think, have the feeling, that he was an absolutely natural sovereign, having come up like a sunflower in a field covered with weeds.

The inhabitants of this country are contradictory. Have a nature like the beautifully woven fabrics whose coloured threads alternate each time. Now the light shines on them from the one side and a bluish sheen seems to spring from the textile, and now the rays of the sun come up to them from the other side. What seemed blue before, is now greenish grey all of a

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sudden. The Indians are like this too: one has to hold them well against the light to see their character. And then what is seen still depends on the stand that one takes as a watcher.

Although they live as primitives in many respects, they are by the paganish Muses blessed with the ability to create fabulous works of art. Of this I have seen examples. Their feeling for beauty is developed. As I mentioned already, we know next to nothing about the actual misuse accepted among these people. From nature gold is extracted here as if it is cultivated, edible vegetation. In our own country we seem to know the precious metal only in its final stage, when it has become solidified pride. He who regards the mountains and the gold mines excavated in them, feels a bond with nature. And from an original human who is not tainted this perhaps takes away his craving for possessions.

## XI.

In the capital I had a flaming row with Pedro de Alvarado. Instead of letting the Indians revel untroubled near the images of Huichilobos and Tlaloc for which he had given permission, he hacked away during the dancing ceremony when Hernando was elsewhere. He apologized by saying that he had prevented things from becoming worse and had assuaged the fire of the dancers, who were more and more whipped up to a blind adoration, but on me this excuse did not make the impression that he may have imagined. The nickname Son of the Sun that the Aztecs have given him, has proved to be the undoing of his ability to make a sound judgment. In a time that everybody who at home led an unknown existence can play the king here, a fatal act was bound to slip out. We found that out to our cost.

De Alvarado was reasonably dissatisfied with the present. Yet I can hardly accept that he wanted to acquire a crown for himself, for notwithstanding our earlier atrocities Hernando's points of departure must have stuck in his memory. Cortés let no chance go by to give the natives the opportunity to associate themselves with him. When they let his offer lie as mildewed maize and his mission seemed to fail, only then did he intervene, yet uncompromising.

Cortés, that image should have been as familiar to De Alvarado as the man himself, never endorses precipitate acting, certainly not when it comes from an officer who substitutes him.

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The sun must have turned Pedro's head. As an officer he was, as we all knew, very hard to rein in, which was our conviction after a number of incidents with which he had hovered on the verge of wilful disobedience. Cortés quieted him down repeatedly. Through his non-attendance it was not possible to counterbalance the ill-fated punitive action.

Now that De Alvarado overlooked the character of Cortés, it was clear that he did not understand that every spark of cooperation that Montezuma might intend to give us, had now been smothered. It immediately put us in very great danger. In a way we were Montezuma's prisoners from the start, even if we made it appear to be the opposite. He kept pulling the strings, for with small caustic remarks his men made it clear that within the foreseeable future our bodies would tumble down the steps yet. Under the patronage that Montezuma allowed to be thrust upon himself, he did not for the time being spoil our illusions that we only had to snap our fingers and he would meet our wishes. Through slowly veering out the neck rope that we were tied down to and then drawing it in again, one had a little game with us of which we were not only the losers, but in addition to which we also constantly misjudged the rules of play and yet thought to see and follow them right.

This *idée fixe* was no luxury, after months of wrestling with the elements of this country that tries to defeat us. Montezuma's shackles were ours, but twisting things round, setting him at liberty, might cost us our head. As long as we could maintain the situation as it was, our future lay safely in secret. And what had to spring out from that, would appear soon enough. We all paid for it, for Cortés had hardly returned from his journey when he had to devote his precious time to the problem that Aztecs stood up on all sides and demanded our blood.

## XII.

No more than I feel like dwelling on the many hand-to-hand fights which pinned us down deeper in this land as the flukes of harpoons, shall I denote what happened when our men, in combat with the natives, were beaten from the temple stairs. Slowly the Indians seemed to cast off their shackles. Just as when an animal tries to free itself with violence from a trap this left gory wounds behind. Do not think - for through the heroic nature of our deeds and those of our opponents you might be beguiled into doing just that - that it was a struggle of mutual respect. Not did we compete to test and establish the superiority of our outstanding master

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gladiators, nor to fall upon each other's necks afterwards tired and covered in sweat while drinking on a fight that was magnanimous but passed off undecided.

Both sides lacked knowledge, insight and sympathy for each other's ways of life. In our desire to spread the faith we were checked by the entire pantheon of Aztec gods. That was an unfair struggle. Our own, real God, compared to a whole legion of false gods. The methods with which we can show the natives that we represent the true faith, that it is for the deliverance of their soul that we have set foot in this land, planted the Christian cross, knocked the gods off their pedestal - these methods must be divulged to us yet.

The blind bloodbaths which lie behind us, lead us further away from conversions. In our camp reigns dissension about the pulling down of the indigenous idols. Cortés, of the opinion that radical proceeding is the line to take and prevention is better than cure, has observed that his tough hand became perceptible into Tenochtitlán. It should prevent the Aztec ruler from jumping on us far too soon. It did not work, for in many an hour the fierceness of the opponent had its origins in his being orphaned after we dethroned his deities.

### XIII.

Montezuma died in my immediate vicinity. He was put through the wringer by Hernando and forced to quieten down his people. Stones narrowly missed. We could hardly avoid them and while I lost my footing on the roof I heard a cry behind me. Montezuma had had stones against head and limbs and collapsed. Cortés got a cold glance in his eyes. He must have understood that this was kill or cure for more than only Montezuma. Because now that this noble figure met with disaster, he also blew away our safeguards with his last breath. As long as Montezuma breathed, ate, talked, we still saw the morning dawn every day. But woe to us, this royal presence popped off.

### XIV.

My new horse was beside itself with fear through the palette of unknown sounds, among which the yowling of the Aztecs and the beating of the big drum. At the rallying of all our vestiges of courage and force, yet stealthily and swiftly, we - men, horses and materiel - fled the obnoxious quarters of Huichilobos. Already quickly our departure was noticed and the

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priests, snatched from dreams in which indubitably they executed even more atrocious services for their deity than of which they daily dared to bear witness in the presence of mortals, called down hell upon us.

I know no more revolting sound than the muffled and at the same time strident sound that came from their shell horns. By nothing I felt more frozen than by the shadows that the worshippers of the devil threw up against a pale illuminated sky, their heads held high in the air, the nozzles of the horns supported by fluttering sleeves. Only through directing our eyes heavenwards ourselves, could we distance ourselves from the turmoil of an army on the run. Seconds only such an intermission took, and loaded in abundance with frightening hallucinations, we saved our bruised and penalized body in what we since call the Noche Triste.

It was also then, that the big drum that was placed on the temple began to mark our exodus. For a second I thought to see the shape before me of a blood-stained compatriot, stretched out on the temple altar. The knife of the celebrants already rasped a way inside past the ribs, to the heart. The heart that now in the open air seemed to have assumed gigantic proportions and just beat and beat. It beat with the rhythm of the big drum. Or was it the heart of my brother that I heard?

Having reached the breaches in the causeways, made time after time by the Indians with great tenacity, it appeared to be a matter of waiting until sufficient men had plunged into the holes. One after another tumbled down, slithering on the blood that had already gushed down from previous companions. Over it we jumped, sometimes losing our footing in the water, sometimes balancing on the corpses of comrades, who thus served us even after their death. With in my hand the miserable remains of bridle reins that had been mended several times already, I drew my quadruped backwards over a hill of bodies. With every step a few men slid further aside and plunged in the water, where after some bobbing they suddenly went down, swept along by others who, with chains of gold still around their necks, met their death which they had pressed to their bosoms themselves.

The cries of fear and pain which rented the night, penetrated my tympanums with not even

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half the power of the piercing signals poured out by the priests with their horns. It was as if the chorion of a whole nation broke, if on the rhythm of the hieratical in- and exhalations Huichilobos' revenging power came into the world and disjointed our senses.

## XV.

A number of days ago I have gone to other tents. The population does not attack now that it is dark. A fellow officer and a soldier both appear to write a record about their adventures, that they intend for posterity. They write for dear life, without knowing whether they can place their words personally on the table at home under the assenting laughter of their loved ones. The chance that the testimonies of my comrades-in-arms, just like they themselves, are later unearthed by Indians - who do not recognize them and discard them inconsiderately after a cursory look - is greater. I do not know what will become of it.

Both are affected by what they have gone through, none of both stems from the rough families that I described before. Yet I found out, after having carefully led the conversation into a certain direction, that they are not capable or prepared to leave their master in the lurch. Actually everybody here is wrong. To avert that I hint in the wrong camp what I am contemplating, I have tried, although shortly, to bend my mind to their vision on war. From that repugnance is manifest.

I have reached the point that a decision about my future can no longer be deferred. When I roved all over this country with my professional colleagues, I postponed resolve after resolve. First to the moment that we would stand on the steps of the temple as victors. Then to the moment that the priests would call the country converted. Since both obsessions were not transformed into reality, I felt compelled to a new delay. That I found in the writing of my apologia.

But now that my paper has almost run out and still no event requiring all attention has given me further postponement, you, receiver of my thoughts, you who are bursting to know if I shall lay violent hands on myself or my people, you who would like to embrace the victor of the whole Spanish invasion, expect to hear an all releasing word. But tell me truly, have you not for a long time now taken my part even though - or must I say because - you know that

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my generation has planted its feet in the soil of Mexico for good? Even with that knowledge you have still nursed hopes that I shall overthrow my army.

I begin to realize that my actual enemies are to be found in Europe. Enemies and opportunists, of whom one never knows why they side with the conqueror. They cheer that he brings his adversary to ruin, but keep standing beside him waiting until he erodes his profit from the inside and throws it to be scrambled for again. By this they gain more than when there would be no victory to be chronicled at all. Then they seize their opportunity themselves.

Bear in mind that foresight has stood in good stead for me. My triumph will be glorious, the defeat of the enemy devastating, because I deploy all available forces in a misleading way and have seen through everything like I see through you. Who will measure what the influence of one single officer may be? Tonight I betake myself to the quarters of Cortés. Of what is my writing the omen?

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